Perspectives on Open and Distance Learning: Open Educational Resources: An Asian Perspective
(Book Review)

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Textbook Details:
Perspectives on Open and Distance Learning: Open Educational Resources: An Asian Perspective
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‘Perspectives on Open and Distance Learning: Open Educational Resources: An Asian Perspective’ offers a look at the current utilization of open educational resources (OER) in higher education (HE) in Asia. This compilation of country perspectives and cases studies is co-published by the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) in Vancouver, Canada and OER Asia operated out of the Institute for Research and Innovation at the Wawasan Open University in Malaysia. It is the latest in a series of publications addressing OER from the COL, which is an intergovernmental organisation comprised of more than 50 countries whose mandate is to “encourage the development and sharing of open learning/distance education knowledge, resources and technologies” (www.col.org/about).

While there are several different definitions of what exactly OER are, the common thread among all the proposed explanations is they are educational resources, from individual lesson plans to entire course modules, that are openly available and can be used by teachers and students for free. Further to this, OER users are actively encouraged to reuse, revise, remix and redistribute the resources, although in reality there are often barriers to accomplishing this goal.

Following a brief overview of the state of OER in HE in Asia generally, the book includes ten in-depth country perspectives, in addition to ten case studies showcasing specific uses of OER. The perspectives and cases studies highlight both the opportunities and barriers of using OER in HE. While some institutions have been quicker to adopt the use of OER than others, it is evident that the use of these resources is on the rise and major investments are being made to integrate them into the HE environment in Asia.

The country perspectives provide a detailed report on the use of OER in various HE institutions in China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, Philippines and Vietnam. Every chapter in this section presents an overview of how OER have been adopted in each of the ten countries, followed by a survey conducted by the authors to further explore the level of acceptance and engagement of OER by HE institutions, and more especially by faculty members and teachers. While the results vary from country to country and from institution to institution, a number of issues appear consistently.

Copyright and intellectual property concerns are cited by all the authors, with the exception of the Virtual University of Pakistan, which makes all of its OER courses available under a Creative Commons license and requires OER producers to assign all intellectual property rights over to the university. In many of the countries perspectives, the authors identify a need for education on copyright and intellectual property rights for faculty members. The surveys indicate that many do not fully understand the implications of both using OER or producing and contributing OER. And while almost all of the HE institutions reported upon are either already using Creative Commons licenses or in the process of moving in that direction, there is also a lack of understanding of what this actually means for individual faculty members. I believe part of the challenge is this is a major shift in the way most faculty and HE institutions are used to working; a shift away from having personal ownership and control over educational resources to making those resources openly available with little to no control over how they are used.
Quality assurance is also cited as an ongoing concern and potential barrier to making educational resources openly available. Understandably, HE institutions and individuals producing OER want the materials they make available to be of excellent quality. Those who succeed in producing high quality materials do so with considerable coordination, time and financial resources. The University of Madras provides a valuable example of a project that entailed producing 250 openly available instructional modules related to students’ soft skills. The project had a budget of $70,320USD and took 27 months to complete with three working groups, including project personnel, a core content development team and an advisory committee to provide quality assurance checks. The author reports that at the time of writing this report, no major cost benefits existed, mainly due to the expense of producing the large number of OER. It seems it is simply too early to tell what the cost benefits are of producing OER on an institution wide scale, however response from teachers, students and the university administration has been positive.

Encouraging faculty and teachers to contribute OER material can be difficult. From the surveys conducted, it appears that while faculty members are actively using OER in their classrooms, they are not yet in the habit of making their teaching materials freely available. Several authors mention the need for HE to create institutional policies that support and promote not only the use of OER, but also the development of such resources amongst their faculty members. Related to this is the need for HE to offer supports to make this culture shift easier, by way of offering training, tech support and scholarly incentives.

Another way to help ease this culture shift would be to provide more knowledge sharing opportunities for faculty and teachers using and producing OER. Many authors reported a lack of organized ways for faculty to learn from each other, both within individual institutions and across institutions and countries. Using readily available social media tools to connect people and provide them with a chance to share their experiences, as well as pose and answer questions may help spread the use of OER more widely and allow faculty to become more comfortable with using them.

The second section of the book offers ten case studies from Malaysia, the Philippines, Korea, Indonesia, Hong Kong, China and four different institutions in India. These case studies provide a glimpse into how OER are being adopted and adapted to suit local needs. Each location has developed different approaches making OER openly available. Many house their institutionally developed OER on purpose built systems, for example Korean’s Open Courseware System and the Indira Ghandi National Open University’s eGyanKosh, a learning resource repository; while others have chosen to instead use third party solutions such as YouTube and iTunesU, as is the case with Beijing Open University. What emerges from these case studies however, is that the exact technology used is really a matter of what makes the most sense for each location—this isn’t a one-size-fits-all endeavour. More important is that institutions are able to make OER freely available in a way that builds on their own individual needs and strengths. In the countries that are most successfully embracing OER, as demonstrated in India, Pakistan and Malaysia, their use has partially been driven by a desire to provide access to education for all members of society, especially to those who have previously been excluded from access to HE. Emerging markets need to provide training and education to a wider audience in new ways in order to achieve their desire for economic growth and equality. This desire, coupled with supportive policies and major financial investments from HE, government sectors and other partners, is enabling countries like those mentioned above to emerge as leaders in OER in Asia.

One of the main strengths of this book is the wide range of examples presented from across Asia, representing a number of different cultures, educational systems and economic realities. I thought the case studies were particularly useful, as they feature very pragmatic issues such as how a variety of OER programs or systems were implemented, how they were supported (or not), challenges faced, lessons learned and the opportunities and successes that were identified, all of which would be of interest to those working in this area.

Unfortunately some of the surveys are more robust than others and some contain relatively low numbers of respondents, for example just 15 respondents are identified in the Japanese survey. This makes it difficult to determine just how wide spread the use OER really in HE. It would have also been useful to survey students at the various institutions to get a sense of how they are using the OER and how important they feel these resources are to their success. I would have also liked to see case studies from all the countries surveyed in the country perspectives section, as there are no case studies from Japan, Pakistan or Vietnam. And lastly, given the rich insights and learnings presented in the case studies, a list of best practices or issues to be mindful of when initiating an OER project would have been a valuable inclusion.
‘Perspectives on Open and Distance Learning: Open Educational Resources: An Asian Perspective’ provides a valuable overview of the current state of OER use in Asia, in addition to highlighting common issues, barriers and opportunities. While the book focuses on Asian examples, I believe the points raised would be of use those in the HE field worldwide. The country perspectives and case studies are especially useful in demonstrating the value of investing in this emerging area of educational technology, as well as the benefits of providing open and freely available OER to populations who might not otherwise have access to HE.

This book would be useful to faculty and teachers, as well as not-for-profits, NGOs and HE institutions interested in using and developing OER. It would also provide useful insights to policy makers, both at universities and in government who can mandate and fund the use of OER. Researchers interested in educational technology and OER, especially those looking for groups or environments to study, may also find this resource of value.